

Building MENTORING CULTURES

How effective mentoring programmes and pathways build a culture of mentoring which is essential for local entrepreneurial ecosystem development.



**MENTORS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF ENTREPRENEURS.**



Entrepreneur Support Organisations (ESOs), such as incubators and accelerators, often provide mentors to strengthen the entrepreneurs and their businesses, with the ultimate goal of creating jobs and promoting economic development.

This emphasis on mentoring is spot on. *Fostering Productive Entrepreneurship Communities (Endeavour Insights)* found that the founders of the fastest-growing companies are much more likely to have received support from mentors and other high-value connections. Mentoring is characterised by a trust-based relationship which focuses on and generates both personal and professional growth. It involves listening and asking questions with empathy, sharing mutual experiences, developing insight through reflection and exploration, being a non-judgmental sounding board, cheerleader and link to key networks where relevant.

With a focus on emerging economies, a number of recent studies (*Afrilabs - Needs Assessment Report, 2020 and the GIZ - Strengthening Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, 2021*) draw attention to the important role played by mentors for venture growth as well as how they enable entrepreneurs to navigate through difficult times, overcome challenges and deepen their self-awareness. However, these studies also acknowledge the challenge faced by many ESOs in building a pool of appropriate mentors who understand the challenges faced by entrepreneurs; from attracting and recruiting to retaining the right caliber of mentors fit for their entrepreneurs.

So it is no surprise that a **frequent question** we get asked at The Human Edge is how to **effectively and sustainably engage local entrepreneurs and business leaders as mentors**? How to attract, motivate and retain the right mentors, locally? Local availability of high calibre mentors is recognised as being crucial to building vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems, but is a challenge that many ESOs face.

The Human Edge has been working in the space of entrepreneurial mentoring for more than a decade, and our insights on building strong mentoring cultures will be valuable for others trying to do the same. In most of our programmes we recruit and train mentors from the local environment, because in our experience, these are the people who add the most value to local entrepreneurs and who have a long term and knock-on effect to building and strengthening entrepreneurial cultures.

At The Human Edge we see that the availability of quality mentors, and **a mentoring culture is a proxy indicator for the maturity of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and in turn, the economic and social development of the country.** In order to help economies to grow and mature, it is imperative to develop and maintain solid pipelines of locally sourced entrepreneurs and leaders as trained mentors. In this paper we share insights as to how we can do this together.

WHO ARE THE BEST MENTORS?



Before exploring how to build strong pipelines of mentors, it is important to first look at who exactly are the mentors we are trying to attract.

The most valuable mentors within all ecosystems are **local entrepreneurs** who have played a pivotal role in setting up and/or growing a local businesses. They will have experienced their fair share of challenges along the way, and adopted a growth mindset which will have enabled them to learn, pivot, reflect, refocus and grow the business. They may either still be an entrepreneur, a leader in the private sector, or a staff member within an ESO.

Either way, they will have direct experience of the nuances, challenges and opportunities which lie within the local business environment and are active within a diverse range of networks. They will have achieved enough success to not be all-consumed by their venture and have the time they need to invest into the mentoring relationship, which is at least a few spare hours per month.

A substitute to strong local mentors are international mentors. ESOs may go down this route as they perceive it will be easier to engage, recruit and manage them as they typically come from countries with strong mentoring cultures and therefore have good understanding and strong commitment.

While these relationships may yield results, unless they are specifically focussed on new sectors or exposure and/or expansion to international markets, the lack of local insight and connections has shown to be less effective than engaging local mentors.

Some programmes attempt to circumvent the need to attract busy entrepreneurs as mentors, who may be difficult to manage and only work with small numbers of mentees due to other commitments, and instead hire **recent business graduates** as mentors to achieve mass mentoring or mentoring at scale. This will most likely achieve superficial and short term results as unless they have had the experience of being an entrepreneur or intrapreneur themselves, their role will at best centre around that of a business advisor, trainer or business coach. Therefore it is misleading to call them mentors.

Recruiting mentors and mentees from the same sector can be important in some situations, but is not essential for the development of **mentoring relationships** that **are built on trust**, chemistry/connection and rapport. Mentors, however, need to understand the general context that the mentee is operating within, whether it be the country, sector and/or growth stage. Mentors do not need to have detailed technical understanding or expertise of the mentee's area of focus to help them reframe problems, explore solutions, and think creatively. Indeed we often find that **cross-sector matching yields the largest opportunities for innovation** and exposure. If technical expertise is needed by the entrepreneur, then technical assistance, specialist training or business advice may instead be the support needed.

MENTORING THE MENTORS



At The Human Edge we repeatedly observe that **the biggest mentoring advocates are those who have first-hand experience of quality mentoring.** This experience will often have been gained from being mentored themselves. They understand the important role mentoring played within their own growth, and that of their businesses. This experience and depth of understanding makes them want to pay it forward and mentor others. This group of people are the first to volunteer as mentors when The Human Edge recruits mentors for a new programme, in countries where we have worked previously.

In emerging entrepreneurship ecosystems, which don't yet have a strong culture of mentoring, it is therefore unsurprising that it is much more difficult to recruit quality mentors. It is a chicken and egg situation: strong mentors are needed to build the next generation of mentees and mentors. But with the absence of these initial mentees and mentors, how can we kick-start the process and catalyse a culture of mentoring?

Poorly structured, underinvested and ad-hoc mentoring programmes don't help with this. If anything, they have the opposite effect. We all know people - or might even be one ourselves - who will admit to having been part of a mentoring programme which wasn't organised well and didn't result in any mentoring.

Many ESOs run mentoring programmes on a shoestring. Without adequate resources, mentoring programmes are not run by knowledgeable mentoring managers. If programmes do not provide the required structure and hands on support that first time mentors and mentees need to perform well, we (including the ecosystem) will lose the chance to build strong networks of mentors for the next generation of mentees and mentors, repeatedly engage them and strengthen their mentoring capability or inspire mentees to transition and become mentors.

The solution? Invest the necessary financial, human and time resources in well managed and run mentoring programmes, which give mentors and their mentees the best possible experience, encouraging them to mentor again and bring others on the journey as well as collectively strengthen the ecosystem.

BUILDING MENTORING CULTURES



At The Human Edge we are under no illusion that building mentor pipelines and mentoring cultures is easy. **It requires a joined-up approach with pro-active collaboration between ecosystem actors** over a number of years to build up a critical mass of mentors and a quality standard of mentoring.

The Human Edge's unique insights into entrepreneur mentoring across emerging economies can enable ecosystem actors to better understand how to build and strengthen mentoring cultures. In light of this, these are our eight recommendations to building effective mentoring cultures:

1. Invest in quality, well designed and managed mentoring programmes.

Engaging the first mentors may be hard, but if their experience is a positive one, they will be highly likely to continue mentoring, which means the funder and ecosystem gets a greater return on investment. Ensure that the programme has clear objectives and a defined structure and is managed by a trained mentoring programme manager. One of the biggest deterrents for entrepreneurs recruited as mentors to continue mentoring is poorly structured programmes that offer little support, where they feel 'used' and gain no value for themselves.

2. Be selective when recruiting mentors and mentees.

Not every successful entrepreneur will have what it takes to be a good mentor, just as not every start-up or growth stage entrepreneur will benefit from a mentoring relationship. There are certain characteristics which determine how ready and effective someone will be as a mentor, or as a mentee how mentorable they are and much they will likely get out of the experience. In order to develop strong mentoring relationships that add value, mentors need to have a high level of emotional intelligence, have humility to be able to engage in a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship with the mentee, and be open to learn and embrace this different approach to engaging with others. Don't waste resources and time offering mentoring to all the entrepreneurs in an ESO support programme. Be selective and invest in only those who you assess are ready and will benefit from it. Other types of support may be more relevant to others: technical assistance, business advice, training, etc.

3. Train your mentors.

Just because someone is a good entrepreneur or business leader, it does not make them a naturally effective mentor. To be effective, mentoring requires a shift in mindset, drawing on skills quite different to those which have tended to make entrepreneurs or managers successful. Without preparation a mentor may jump into problem-solving and advice mode. Instead of providing solutions a good mentor uses various skills such as powerful questioning, active listening and provides guidance through the sharing of his/her own experience to support their mentee to explore and reflect on challenges and find their own solutions. Training

your mentors is critical for them to gain confidence in what they are doing, learn new skills which they can take back to their own workplace and personal lives, and give and get more out of the mentoring process. All of which encourages them to come back and mentor again.

4. Prepare your mentees.

While many entrepreneurs pinpoint mentors as being critical to their growth and business success, they often have wildly different expectations from them. Many expect solutions, and answers to follow, as well as investment and instant access to new

networks and contacts. The reality is that mentoring is a relationship and a journey which are not always easy to build and navigate. To gain the most from mentoring, entrepreneurs need to be open and prepared to listen and change, before growing. They too need to be prepared for the journey and understand how to drive and make the most from the relationship, thereby increasing their mentorability.

5. Create a structured programme.

While some ESOs prefer to make a network of mentors available to entrepreneurs, this discourages long-term trust based mentoring relationships to be built. In the absence of this, mentors have no option but to adopt the role of advisors. Trust is often a barrier to quality mentoring and in post-conflict countries or emerging economies this is usually low. Create structured programmes that provide a mentoring pathway with support, peer learning and accountability to ensure learning and insights are translated into action.

6. Enable mentees to loop back as mentors.

If mentees have seen the personal and business value of mentoring, as selectively recruited entrepreneurs into well-structured mentoring programmes will do, a few years down the line they could be ripe for being mentors themselves. Create processes and content to inspire and re-engage mentees as mentors. Of course it is still important to ensure that they are adequately trained to engage in this next phase of their journey.

7. Build mentoring cultures across ecosystems, not just within individual ESOs.

It is unrealistic to expect active entrepreneurs to mentor with only one ESO and mentoring should be inclusive at all times. Quality mentors will be in demand, and so are likely to engage with different ESOs over time or even mentor outside of structured programmes. In order to turn this into a benefit for the ecosystem, ESOs should work together to build a common definition of mentoring and structure of a mentoring programme, although individual structure and details may vary, as the context and requirements within each ESO differs. This will require time, coordination and funding, however, a ground up ecosystem builders approach will yield greater results in the long term.

8. Turn the spotlight on mentoring.

Mentors may not seek recognition for what they do, but creating strong mentoring

role models and sharing their stories will inspire and encourage others in the network to come forward and support the new generation of entrepreneurs. Equally important is measuring the impact of mentoring, again using some standardised indicators across the ecosystem helps to build a stronger picture of what works, and what doesn't. Coordinate communication and M&E/research efforts and publish the results widely. Create processes to re-engage mentees as mentors. Of course it is still important to ensure that they are adequately trained to engage in this next phase of their journey.

IN PRACTISE: MENTORING IN JORDAN



The Human Edge first started its work in 2009 in Jordan, primarily due to our Founder's connections to the country and the vibrancy of the ecosystem. There was significant appetite and interest amongst entrepreneurs to have a mentor, but there was little understanding - even amongst well seasoned entrepreneurs - of exactly what mentoring was and how they could truly benefit from it. So recruiting local entrepreneurs as mentors was very hard initially.

For the first three years of The Human Edge's work in Jordan, our mentoring programmes were run with UK-based mentors. In those pre-digital days the programmes started with a 4-day in country and in person workshop between the mentors and mentees which focussed on building the foundations for their virtual engagement thereafter. This, along with the structure and tight management of the programme, helped them to develop strong and long lasting relationships. More than a decade later, many are still in contact. There were also challenges. The mentors did not understand the local context, nor have relevant local connections. The programme costs were also high. These were barriers to sustainability.

After these initial programmes, several cohorts of Jordanian mentees had experienced the value of mentoring and had grown themselves as well as their businesses. They were eager to give back, and become mentors themselves. So by The Human Edge's third year, UK mentors were no longer recruited. Instead local Jordanian mentors were: either people who had been mentees themselves, or others who had heard about the programme and were ready to mentor. They received extensive training, not on business skills but enabling them to develop the qualities, skills, toolkit, characteristics and mindset of effective mentoring.

And so it snowballed, with a good proportion of their mentees in turn, eventually becoming mentors. To date The Human Edge has worked with over twenty-five cohorts (each with an average of 12 mentor-mentee pairs) in Jordan. That is over 315 trained mentors, which has been enough to start the ball rolling and has catalysed the widespread development of a mentoring culture. People across ESOs have been trained and bring mentoring principles, philosophy and practice into their work. Having all been through the same programme, they have a consistent understanding and definition of mentoring which has elevated the status and quality standard of mentoring in the ecosystem. Further to people's own experiences, we regularly see new mentoring programmes being announced within organisations and/or expanded to reach greater numbers of people.

We are heartened when we speak to those who run or mentor within these programmes and they can be traced back to a The Human Edge cohort that they have been part of. Their eyes light up, and they talk about what a great experience it was. It was their introduction to mentoring and it had a profound impact on them. With this critical mass in place, the emphasis now needs to be placed on how to build the capacity of others to build and embed more effective mentoring programmes for impact.

THE WAY FORWARD



This paper was inspired by a conference participant who asked – how do you successfully build pipelines of mentors? We reflected, and found that our organisation's unique insights into entrepreneur mentoring across emerging economies helps to highlight some of the important factors necessary to build strong mentoring cultures. Of course, one size will never fit all, but a broad framework and joint direction of travel does help. By streamlining our efforts and with the right collaborations and partnerships, results can be short-tracked and mentoring pipelines built more efficiently and effectively.

Having run one-off entrepreneur mentoring programmes for over a decade, we are acutely aware of how hard and long it can take for a single organisation to transform the mentoring landscape alone. We now know that the only sustainable way forward is to concertedly collaborate within ecosystems and engage with a variety of actors including donors, ecosystem builders, ESOs and entrepreneurs. We need to share a vision (and a definition and standard of mentoring), and be aligned on how to grow mentoring cultures that thrive rather than working on individual mentoring programmes in silos. This is our direction of travel at The Human Edge over the next decade.

Engage with us to continue the conversation.

If you are a donor or ecosystem builder interested in building mentoring cultures, get in touch. We can explore how we can support you to achieve your goals, working across your target ecosystem.

If you would like to incorporate an effective mentoring programme into your organisation, we are well placed to support you. With our EMCC accredited mentoring syllabus we are the only organisation specialised in delivering mentoring within emerging markets in the Middle East, North Africa and sub Saharan Africa.

Contact us on info@humanedge.org.uk or visit our website www.humanedge.org.uk

Building thriving businesses and social impact organisations that drive lasting positive change takes confident leadership, skills, and connections.

The Human Edge, formerly Mowgli Mentoring, is a mentoring and coaching specialist organisation. We use this expertise as a foundation to design and deliver learning programmes and initiatives for entrepreneurs, managers and leaders. Through our work, we equip people, organisations and ecosystems with the tools, approaches, and skills to overcome challenges, build stronger relationships, steer their organisations forward and achieve greater impact, faster.

We partner globally, and work in multiple languages, across contexts, cultures, and sectors.

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